

The Neglected Father Role in Treating Drug Abusers

VISN 1 MIRECC researchers have documented larger numbers of fathers than mothers entering treatment for heroin dependence. Destructive consequences of drug abuse are not limited to the drug abuser. Drug abuse by fathers has been linked to child abuse, parental neglect and behavior problems in their children. When drug abusing fathers seek treatment, this can provide an opportunity to also provide treatment to their high risk children to reduce the negative impact paternal drug abuse. Also, greater awareness of parental responsibilities can help motivate drug abusing fathers to stay off drugs. Attention to parenting in drug abuse treatment has traditionally focused on drug abusing mothers since women are more likely to enter treatment while living with young children. In this new study, the researchers looked at parental status of over 500 heroin users seeking treatment, of whom over two-thirds were men. In this group of men and women mostly in their middle thirties, over 60% reported being parents and 60% of the parents were men. Hence, interventions to improve parenting in drug abusers would neglect the majority of parents if they focus only on women. Notably, the majority of both mothers (54%) and fathers (80%) were not living with their children at the onset of treatment, even though the average age of the children was between 10-14 years old. These findings emphasize the need to address the social network of drug abusers seeking treatment. This research group has developed special parenting treatments for both substance abusing mothers and substance abusing fathers. The study was led by Yale researcher Thomas McMahon and MIRECC researcher Bruce Rounsaville, included Yale researchers Suniya Luthar and Justin Winkel.